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ABSTRACT

Those who could most benefit from adult education are the least likely to participate in it, according to data from a 1991 large-scale, nationally representative field test of the educational activities of adults in the United States. The National Household Education Survey data showed that 38 percent of adults age 17 or older participated in some educational activity in 1990-91. Those more likely to participate in adult education are in the following groups: (1) people in professional, technical, support, service, finance, insurance, or real estate occupations, elementary and secondary teachers, and public administrators; (2) people with some college; (3) people in households with incomes above $30,000; (4) whites; (5) adults between 35 and 44; (6) married or single (never married) adults; and (7) adults with children under 16 compared to those with no children. Adults with a 12th-grade education or less, who were not employed, or whose households were at the lowest income levels seemed less likely to participate in some part-time educational activity. (NLA)

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Adult Education Profile for 1990-91

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The people who presumably could most benefit from adult education are the least likely to participate in it, according to first data from a 1991 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) large-scale, nationally representative field test of the educational activities of adults in the United States.

The National Household Education Survey (NHES) data showed that 38 percent of adults age 17 and over participated in some educational activity over a 12-month period in 1990–91. Of these, 31.6 percent participated on a part-time basis; 6.3 percent participated on a full-time basis only, which included 4.9 percent enrolled full-time in a college or university, about 1 percent enrolled full-time in some other education or training, and 0.5 percent enrolled full-time both in college and in some other training activity (see figure 1 and table 1). The survey did not include those enrolled full-time in high school.

Characteristics of participants in adult education (i.e., part-time participants) include the following:

- People with jobs were more likely to participate in part-time educational activities than those who were unemployed or not in the labor force. Those in professional occupations; executive, administrative, or managerial occupations; or technical support or service occupations were more likely than those in other occupations to participate. Those in finance, insurance, real estate, or service industries; in elementary or secondary schools; or in public administration had higher than average rates of participation in adult education.

- People with some college were more likely to participate than those with no postsecondary school experience. Participation rates of adults with some college or an associate's or bachelor's degree ranged from 39 to 52 percent. For those with a 12th grade education or less, participation rates ranged from 7 to 22 percent.

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- People in households with incomes above $30,000 were more likely to participate than those in households with incomes less than $25,000.
- Whites were more likely to participate than blacks.
- Adults between the ages of 35 and 44 were the most likely to participate.
- Divorced and widowed adults were less likely to participate than either married or single, never married adults (24 percent compared to 33 and 31 percent, respectively).
- Adults with children under 16 were more likely to participate than those with no children (37 percent compared to 28 percent).
- Men and women participated at the same rate.

These findings suggest that those who would benefit greatly from participation in some part-time educational activity seemed less likely to do so: that is, adults with a 12th grade education or less, who were not employed, or whose households were at the lowest income levels (see table 2). The reasons for participation in adult education and perceived barriers to participation will be analyzed, and the results will be reported in a future issue of *Statistics in Brief*. Also, a technical report comparing participation rates from the 1991 National Household Education Survey and the 1984 Current Population Survey supplement on participation in adult education is forthcoming.

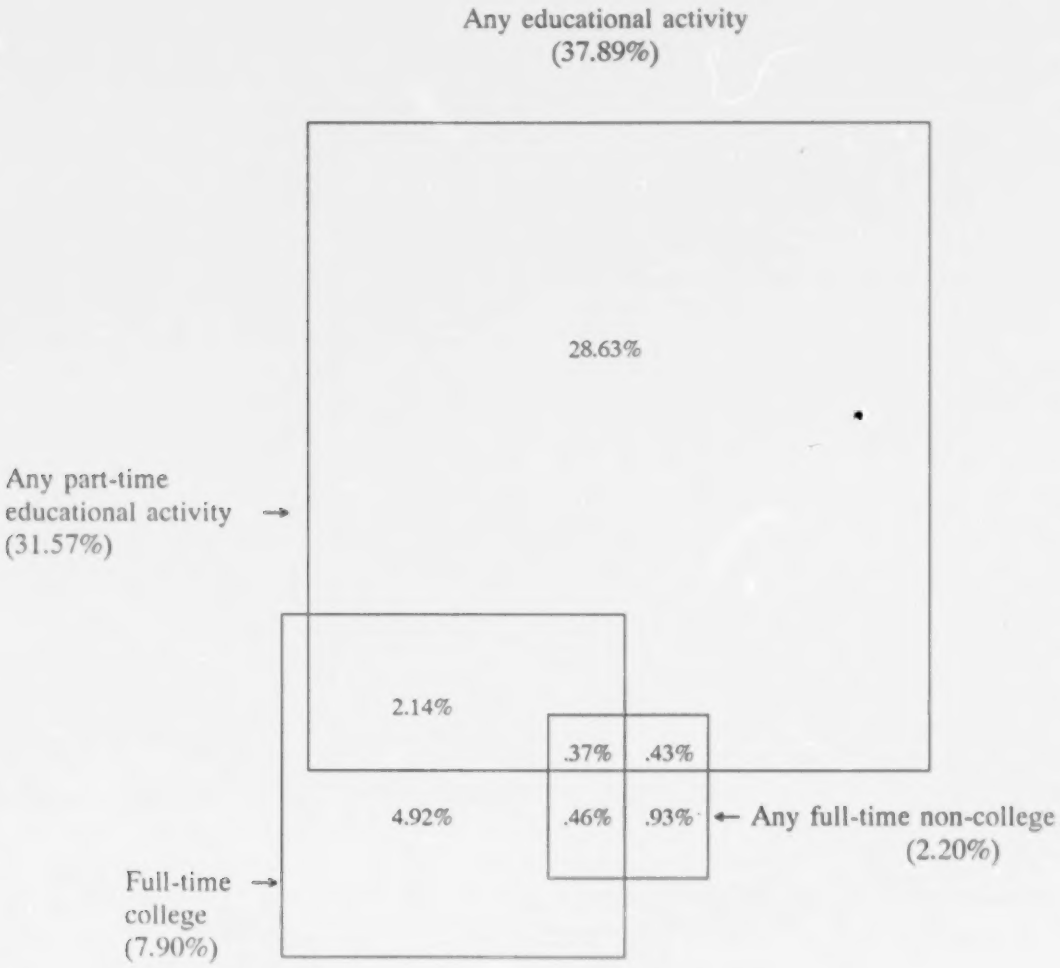
The adult education survey will be conducted every 3 years. Conducted as a large-scale, nationally representative field test, the survey is a component of the NCES National Household Education Survey, a random-digit dialing telephone survey of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population in the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Survey Background

This report makes a distinction between adults participating in educational activities and participation in adult education. This distinction is made because there is some debate as to what constitutes adult education. Prior to the NHES, data collection efforts had defined adult education as any part-time enrollment in any educational activity at any time in a 12-month period by individuals 17 years of age and older[1]. This report maintains that historical perspective of adult education. It has been argued, however, that the definition of adult education should also include any full-time, noncollege educational activity, or even that it should include all educational activities in which adults engage (including college), regardless of the adult's full- or part-time enrollment status.

[1]This definition was used in previous surveys of participation in adult education conducted by the Census Bureau through its Current Population Survey (CPS). This supplement to the May CPS was carried out on a triennial basis from 1969 to 1984 for the Department of Education. See Hill, S. T., *Trends in Adult Education 1969-1984*, Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education, 1987.

Figure 1.--Percent of U.S. adult population engaged in specified types of educational activities at some time in a 12-month period: 1990-91



NOTE: Adult population is defined as the noninstitutional, civilian population, 17 years of age and older, excluding those currently enrolled full-time in elementary or secondary schools at the time of the survey. Figure not to scale.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES), Adult Education Component, spring 1991.

Table 1.--Number and percent of civilian, noninstitutionalized adults, 17 years of age or over, who participated in any educational activity in a 12-month period, by type of participation: 1991

Type of participation	Number (thousands)	Standard error	Percent	Standard error
All educational activities	68,875	1,336	37.89	.74
Any part-time only 1/	52,044	1,105	28.63	.63
Full-time in college only 2/	8,951	512	4.92	.28
Any full-time noncollege only 3/	1,691	159	0.93	.09
Any part-time and full-time in college 1/,2/	3,887	249	2.14	.14
Any part-time and full-time noncollege 1/,3/	785	133	0.43	.07
Full-time in college and full-time noncollege 2/,3/	842	79	0.46	.04
Any part-time and full-time in college and full-time noncollege 1/,2/,3/	676	83	0.37	.05
Selected subtotals				
Any part-time activity	57,391	1,169	31.57	.65
Full-time in college	14,356	701	7.90	.38
Full-time non-college	3,994	224	2.20	.12

1/ Included in the subtotal for any part-time activity.
2/ Included in the subtotal for full-time in college.
3/ Included in the subtotal for full-time noncollege.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES), Adult Education Component, spring 1991.

This report defines an adult as any individual 17 years of age or older. "Educational activities" include all full- and part-time formal and informal educational experiences in which adults participated over the 12-month period preceding the survey. The single exclusion to this broad definition is full-time attendance in elementary or secondary school. In fact, people identified as being enrolled full-time in an elementary or secondary school at the time of the survey were not interviewed. A significant proportion of 17- and 18-year-olds are not included as part of the adult population because, at the time of the survey, they were enrolled full-time in elementary or secondary school.

As a result of the broad definition of educational activities and because of the time period covered (12 months), a person could have participated in several different types of educational activities over the course of the year. He/she could have enrolled in college on a full-time and later, on a part-time basis. He/she could have been enrolled full-time in a vocational program; taken a course provided by a community service organization, such as a library or museum; or received on-the-job training provided by his/her employer. A large number of such combinations of educational and training experiences are possible.

The adult education (AE) component of the 1991 NHES was designed to permit researchers to explore various combinations of adult educational activities and to define adult education in many ways.

Adults Participating in Educational Activities

Figure 1 and table 1 illustrate the flexibility of the NHES adult education data.

They present an all-inclusive picture of adult educational activities; they display some of the more interesting combinations of educational activities; and they provide the percentage of adults that reported having participated in these activities. Three major categories of educational activities are considered in figure 1: full-time attendance in a college or university (4-year or 2-year college); full-time enrollment in any other type of educational activity, such as vocational training, training in English as a second language, training for a General Education Development (GED) test, and so forth; and part-time participation in any type of education or training provided by any type of provider including colleges and universities, employers, community organizations, and state and local education agencies. The overlapping areas in the figure indicate the percentage of individuals reporting more than one of these three types of educational activities.

A different perspective on adults' participation in educational activities is obtained if combinations of the three major types of educational activities are considered. For example, 7.9 percent of adults in the United States were enrolled full-time in a college or university[2] at some time in the 12-month period as compared to the 4.9 percent who were enrolled full-time in college only during this time; 2.2 percent of adults participated full-time in some type of educational activity other than college; and 31.6 percent participated in some educational activity on a part-time basis.

Methodology and Data Reliability

The National Household Education Survey (NHES) is a telephone survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The survey is designed to be representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons in the 50 States and the District of Columbia. The sample is selected using random-digit-dialing (RDD) methods, and data are collected using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology. Data collection took place between late January and early May of 1991.

Two different survey instruments were used to collect data for the adult education field test component. The first instrument, a household "screener" administered to an adult member of the household, was used to enumerate each adult over the age of 15, including

[2] 4.9 percent enrolled full-time in college only; .46 percent enrolled full-time in college and full-time in some other educational activity; 2.1 percent enrolled full-time in college and part-time in any educational activity; and .37 percent enrolled full-time in college, full-time in some other educational activity, and part-time in any educational activity (including part-time in college).

Table 2.—Number of adults, adult education participants, and rate of participation, civilian noninstitutional population 17 years and older excluding those enrolled in elementary or secondary schools, by selected characteristics: United States, 1990–91

Characteristic	Adult Population (thousands)	Participation in the past 12 months			
		Number (thousands)	Standard error	Rate	Standard error
Total adults	181,800	57,391	1,169	32	0.7
Age					
17–24 years	21,688	7,125	311	33	1.4
25–34 years	47,244	17,530	870	37	1.9
35–44 years	38,565	17,083	759	44	2.1
45–54 years	25,375	8,107	389	32	2.2
55–64 years	19,967	4,516	419	23	2.1
65 years and over	28,960	3,031	322	10	1.3
Sex					
Male	82,154	25,923	842	32	1.1
Female	99,646	31,469	831	32	0.9
Race–ethnicity					
White, non–Hispanic	143,144	47,401	1,115	33	0.8
Black, non–Hispanic	20,141	4,586	419	23	2.0
Hispanic	13,804	4,032	345	29	2.6
Other races, non–Hispanic	4,711	1,371	139	29	3.5
Household income					
$10,000 or less	27,504	3,843	344	14	1.3
$10,001 to $15,000	15,465	3,178	332	21	2.5
$15,001 to $20,000	16,117	3,308	258	21	2.2
$20,001 to $25,000	16,092	4,063	381	25	3.1
$25,001 to $30,000	17,973	5,445	302	30	2.4
$30,001 to $40,000	26,110	9,043	520	35	1.8
$40,001 to $50,000	21,303	9,313	542	44	1.9
$50,0001 to $75,000	24,540	11,235	547	46	2.0
More than $75,000	16,695	7,693	567	48	3.1
Marital status					
Never married	36,652	11,539	494	31	1.3
Currently married	118,397	39,323	1,006	33	0.9
Other	26,752	6,529	369	24	1.8
Children under 16 in household					
Yes	68,868	25,349	928	37	1.6
No	112,932	32,042	864	28	0.7
Years of school completed					
Up to eighth grade	10,163	735	124	7	1.4
Ninth to eleventh grade	17,581	2,520	363	14	2.3
Twelfth grade	67,129	15,077	685	22	1.1
Vocational school after high school	6,994	2,219	258	32	3.8
Some college	36,823	14,488	485	39	1.6
Associate's degree	5,034	2,461	173	49	5.8
Bachelor's degree or higher	38,076	19,891	786	52	2.0

Table 2.—Number of adults, adult education participants, and rate of participation, civilian noninstitutional population 17 years and older excluding those enrolled in elementary or secondary schools, by selected characteristics: United States, 1990–91—Continued

Characteristic	Adult Population (thousands)	Participation in the past 12 months			
		Number (thousands)	Standard error	Rate	Standard error
Region					
Northeast	37,975	12,042	558	32	1.5
Midwest	43,889	13,242	553	30	1.2
South	62,124	18,024	968	29	1.5
West	37,812	14,083	759	37	2.0
Labor force status					
In the labor force					
Employed	115,620	47,143	1076	41	1.0
Unemployed	9,820	2,099	280	21	3.1
Not in the labor force	56,361	8,149	505	14	0.9
Current occupation (of employed persons)					
Executive, administrative, and managerial	5,357	3,479	262	65	4.3
Technical and related support	2,414	1,566	143	65	4.8
Sales workers	12,685	5,242	322	41	3.1
Administrative support, including clerical	26,713	11,816	583	44	2.3
Service	18,137	5,081	376	28	2.4
Agriculture, forestry, and fishing	2,496	257	48	10	3.7
Precision production, craft, and repair	9,723	3,001	258	31	4.0
Machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors	8,253	2,436	276	30	3.9
Transportation and materials moving	3,286	949	263	29	7.7
Handlers, equipment cleaners, helpers, and laborers	2,715	587	183	22	6.7
Nonclassifiable, undetermined	6,185	1,662	175	27	3.5
Current industry (of employed persons)					
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	3,109	416	54	13	4.0
Mining and construction	5,644	1,819	250	32	4.4
Manufacturing	17,448	6,912	492	40	2.8
Transportation and public utilities	7,763	2,788	272	36	6.0
Wholesale trade	2,459	730	130	30	6.7
Retail trade	14,643	5,486	471	37	2.6
Finance, insurance, and real estate	6,612	3,798	272	57	5.0
Services	29,979	13,014	581	43	2.1
Elementary and secondary schools	3,682	2,043	159	55	8.5
Colleges, universities, and vocational schools	3,704	1,432	148	39	4.5
Public administration	12,063	6,261	384	52	2.8
Nonclassifiable, undetermined	8,515	2,446	208	29	3.0

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES), Adult Education Component, spring 1991.

those living away from home in school housing. The screener respondent was asked a series of items about each adult's educational participation over the past 12 months. Adults currently enrolled as full-time high school or elementary students were not sampled. Part-time AE participants were included with certainty, full-time students were sampled at a rate of 50 percent, and nonparticipants were sampled at a rate of about 8 percent.

The participation status determined from the screener was used for sampling purposes only. Once an adult was sampled for an interview, the interview responses of the adult were used to determine participation status, rather than information provided in the screener.

NHES respondents were asked separately whether they had participated in different full-time educational activities (e.g., a program leading to an associate's degree, a program leading to a bachelor's or more advanced degree, or a vocational or occupational training program) during the 12 months preceding the survey. Because of the way in which the questions were asked, it is not possible to tell whether participation in more than one full-time activity represents participation in more than one program or participation in a single program. For example, an individual may have been enrolled in a full-time vocational program leading to an associate's degree at a 2-year college, while another person may have been both enrolled full-time in a vocational program at a trade school and enrolled full-time in a 2-year college at some time during the 12-month period. Both of these types of participation have been included in the full-time combination category found in table 1 and figure 1 (i.e., full-time in college and full-time, noncollege, representing less than 0.5 percent of the adult population).

The adult education field test component of the NHES was the first national survey of adult education since May 1984, when the Bureau of the Census conducted an adult education survey as a supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The comparability of the estimates from these surveys are being examined and will be reported in a forthcoming publication. This publication will examine definitional, operational, and methodological differences between the surveys.

Data Reliability

Estimates produced using data from the NHES are subject to two types of error, sampling and nonsampling. Sampling errors occur because the data are collected from a sample rather than a census of the population. Nonsampling errors are errors made in the collection and processing of data. Both are discussed below.

Nonsampling Errors

Nonsampling error is the term used to describe variations in the estimates which may be caused by coverage, data collection, processing, and reporting procedures. The sources of nonsampling errors are typically problems like unit and item nonresponse, the differences in respondents' interpretation of the meaning of the questions, response differences related to the particular time the survey was conducted, and mistakes in data preparation.

In general, it is difficult to identify and estimate either the amount of nonsampling error or the bias caused by this error. However, in the NHES survey, efforts were made to prevent it from occurring, and to compensate for it where possible.

An important source of nonsampling error for a telephone survey is the failure to include persons who do not live in households with telephones. About 93 percent of all adults live in households with telephones. Estimation procedures were used to help reduce the bias in the estimates associated with adults who did not live in telephone households.

Response Rates

The NHES completed early childhood (EC) screeners with 60,314 households. At least one adult was sampled in 9,948 of the households for the AE survey. The response rate for the screener was 81 percent. The completion rate for the AE interview, or the percentage of interviews conducted, was 88 percent. Thus, the overall response rate for the AE interview was 72 percent (the product of the household screening response rate and the AE completion rate).

For the NHES, item nonresponse (the failure to complete some items in an otherwise completed interview) was very low. The unweighted item nonresponse rates for the row variables in table 2 ranged from 0 to 15 percent. Data were imputed for these sociodemographic variables. The unweighted item nonresponse rates for the participation variables were less than 0.2 percent. When preparing estimates of proportions, this item nonresponse was treated as missing data. This is equivalent to assuming equal distributions for both respondents and nonrespondents.

Sampling Errors

The sample of telephone households selected for the NHES is just one of many possible samples that could have been selected. Therefore, estimates produced from the NHES sample may differ from estimates that would have been produced from other samples. This type of variability is called sampling error because it arises from using a sample of households with telephones, rather than all households with telephones. The standard error is a measure of the variability due to sampling when estimating a statistic[3]. It indicates how much variance there is in the population of possible estimates of a parameter for a given sample size. Standard errors can be used as a measure of the precision expected from a particular sample. The probability that a complete census would differ from the sample by less than one standard error is about 68 out of 100. The chances that the difference would be less than 1.65 times the standard error are about 90 out of 100; that the difference would be less than 1.96 the standard error, about 95 out of 100.

Standard errors for all of the estimates are presented in the tables. These standard errors can be used to produce confidence intervals. For example, an estimated 32 percent of adults participated in part-time adult education in the 12 months prior to the survey. This figure has an estimated standard error of 0.7 percent. Therefore, the estimated 95 percent confidence interval for this statistic is approximately 31-33 percent (32 percent plus/minus 1.96 times 0.7). All differences cited in the text of this report are significant at the 0.05 level of significance. Where applicable, Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons were used.

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[3]Standard errors for statistics presented in this report were estimated using a jackknife replication method.